

couple relationships/marriage in high-risk, vulnerable populations.)

Media (tools for influencing and changing the culture . . . putting issues on the public agenda)

Charitable Choice liaison to lead the state's efforts to partner with charitable and faith-based organizations in providing and delivering social services

Youth Education/Prevention Programs (changing the attitudes of young people who are yet to personally confront the issues of marriage/divorce)

While in Washington, DC, Regier called on other leaders to join in this important goal to reduce the divorce rate in their own state.

"Setting a measurable goal is the first step in achieving your objective, and those of us in Oklahoma who are seeing the good impact of our work challenge other states to join us by setting measurable goals for reducing the divorce rate by a set amount in a time certain," says Regier. "It's difficult to reach an undefined goal."

"Just as we set an Oklahoma goal of reducing the divorce rate by 1/3, we have now also set aside a specific amount of money to achieve the objective. While the final amount of allocated resources may be more or less in the final analysis, Governor Keating, the Department of Human Services Board, and I all agreed that we must begin to move forward with a significant commitment of resources. We will not let a lack of funding deter us from meeting this goal that will positively impact Oklahomans in all walks of life," Regier concluded.

Regier was in Washington to represent Governor Keating at a press conference for The Empowerment Network (TEN). Keating is the national co-chairman of this group which today released a bold bi-partisan platform designed to translate election-year rhetoric about American renewal into measurable gains for America's communities and families.

Regier was joined at the press event by Keating's national co-chair, Senator Dan Coats (R-IN), who presented, Empowerment Blueprint 2001: Strategies for Family and Community Renewal, a "step-by-step agenda for leaders at the national, state, and local levels, and the private sector."

STATE OF OKLAHOMA,
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR,
Oklahoma City, OK.

DEAR DHS COMMISSION MEMBERS: This letter comes as a request for you to take a bold step towards meeting one of the goals I've set for Oklahoma—to reduce the divorce rate by 1/3 by 2010. I'm asking you to make a commitment to spend up to \$10 million this next year from TANF funds for strategies that will strengthen Oklahoma marriages, resulting in a reduction in divorce. In discussions between Secretary Regier and Director Hendrick, it would appear that this level of funding is an appropriate beginning for this important effort.

Because of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, people in all sectors of our society are taking notice of the consequences of divorce, especially for families with children, and are clamoring for action. While this is a very new subject for policy makers, and there are a limited number of program demonstrations to build on, the overriding need makes it necessary to proceed with our best efforts.

As we continue to build our strategy for reducing the divorce rate, we must pay attention to what we can do to address couple unions in low-income populations. We must also look for strategies to strengthen two-parent families and marriages for non-needy persons in these communities. Certainly the federal government understood that when it drafted the TANF guidelines, with three of

the four goals related to strengthening marriage/reducing divorce and reducing out-of-wedlock births. These four goals are:

(1) "to provide assistance to needy families so that the children may be cared for in their homes or in the homes of relatives."

(2) "to end dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work and marriage . . ."

(3) "to prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies"

(4) "to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families."

As Commission Members, I don't need to tell you how vital it is that we devote resources to support this important goal. While some in the country are asking why the government would become involved in the issue of marriage and divorce, we know clearly the reasons because of our on-going initiative:

Many of society's ills can be traced to the rapidly declining status of marriages in this country.

Couples marrying for the first time today have at least a 50% chance of divorce.

The conflict that precedes and surrounds divorce causes great mental, physical and economic damage to parents and children alike.

The "triple threat" of marital conflict, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births has led to a generation of U.S. children at great risk for poverty, alienation, and antisocial behavior.

The decline in marriage cuts across nations, class religion and races, however it is most marked among the poor. Low-income individuals are at higher risk of out-of-wedlock childbearing, of cohabitation, are less likely to marry, and when they do marry are more likely to separate and divorce than middle or high-income couples. The proportion of children who live with only one parent has more than doubled nationally since 1970, from 12% to 28% in 1998.

This development is causing growing concern among policy makers and the public. The costs of single parenthood are most serious for children and for society as a whole. Almost half (49%) of children in female-headed households were poor in 1998. Single-parent households are five times more likely to be poor than two parent households. Studies document that children raised in single-parent homes are at greater risk of poverty, and other negative outcomes such as school drop out, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy and themselves become divorced. Nationally, over half of the parents receiving welfare are not married to their child's other parent, nearly 20% are divorced or separated, 11% are married (DHHS, 1999).

Several major theories have been put forward to account for the nationwide decline in marriage. Certainly part of that decline can be attributed to the expansion of welfare programs that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. Since these programs were targeted on single-parent families, it is often argued that the government was stepping in to take the place of others, undermining their responsibility to provide for their families and creating financial incentives to break up or discourage marriage on the theory that "you get more of what you subsidize." I applaud you for the changes you have made in DHS policy to change this trend in Oklahoma.

Now, I'm asking you to take the next step. . . . to build the capacity of our systems to strengthen marriages and reduce divorces. . . . and to provide new marital direct services to all of our Citizens statewide. Over the coming months we will be working with you to develop details of our action plan, including some of the components summarized on the attachment, and indeed DHS Director

Hendrick will be vitally involved in finalizing these plans with Secretary Regier.

There are many highlights of the plan that you will hear about over the coming months, but both Cathy and I are convinced of the value of skills training for couples. Over this past year we have heard from several martial experts that relational qualities and patterns of interaction assume a much greater importance in contemporary marriages than in former times. Most of the traditional economic, legal, social and cultural constraints that used to keep marriages together have fallen away. In addition couples now have higher expectations for marital happiness—having all one's needs met by one's marital partner—and are readier to dissolve the union if they are not satisfied. The result is that there is much more pressure on couples ability to communicate well, negotiate and resolve conflict, accept each other's differences, and stay committed to working on their relationship. We must find ways to help Oklahomans strengthen these skills if they are to continue marriages in today's culture.

Over a year ago I addressed all Oklahomans in my Inaugural address and in my State of the State address to reduce the social ills that hold us back as a people and as an economy. I then asked Jerry Regier, my Cabinet Secretary for Health and Human Services, to take the lead on building this initiative on my behalf, and we've made great progress over this past year in raising public awareness about the consequences of divorce. During this upcoming year, I've told Jerry to call on the very best experts in this country to finalize and implement a strategy that will result in stronger marriages. He is available to work with you and Director Hendrick to make sure that we achieve our shared goal of reducing the divorce rate in Oklahoma, as well as the goal of TANF monies to promote and strengthen marriage.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the citizens of Oklahoma and I urge you to act now to obligate these critical funds towards achieving our goals.

Sincerely,

Governor FRANK KEATING.

OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

Summary of the goals of our plan:
Community Covenants (religious leaders join other sector leaders in community-based solutions to reduce the divorce rate).

Scholar-in-Residence: Oklahoma State University (national marriage expert).

On-going activities to keep marriage/divorce on the public agenda.

Statewide training/service delivery system (working with the nation's experts to develop this system/curriculum that will provide research-based skills training).

Marriage Resource Center (information, mentorship, etc.).

Research/Evaluation (in consultation with OSU and the nation's best martial research experts).

Improvement of our data system (to understand more about our divorce rate and where to focus our resources).

Second Annual Governor and First Lady's Conference on Marriage.

Fatherhood Projects (integration of fatherhood projects into the marriage initiative).

Mother Mentoring/Children First (integration of motherhood projects into the marriage initiative).

Support of other coalitions/services (pilot demonstration projects that will strengthen couple relationships/marriage in high-risk, vulnerable populations.).

Media (tools for influencing and changing the culture . . . putting issues on the public agenda).

Charitable Choice liaison to lead the state's efforts to partner with charitable and